

# The last word Finding and using the truth

by the Editors

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Many people from the United States have recently traveled to Nicaragua. Some are working there on a more or less permanent basis, contributing their skills to the reconstruction of the country. Others have gone down to pick coffee, a major export crop threatened by U.S. financed and directed contra raids from Honduras. Still others are participating in religious programs for peace by living as witnesses and visible foreign residents in isolated northern towns, where they could easily be killed by *contra* attacks.

Going down to Nicaragua in this way is an expression of social privilege. People need to have (or be able to raise) over \$1000 and be able to take time off from work and family responsibilities. Certainly many other people would go if it were possible, if, for example, our government supported the activity by making inexpensive transportation available. Nonetheless, those who do go on these trips want to demonstrate concretely and personally their solidarity with the Nicaraguan people and also see the Nicaraguan revolution with their own eyes. In return, we all benefit from their reports when they return.

As our government bombs Lebanon and moves ever closer to sending U.S. troops into combat in El Salvador and/or Nicaragua, the propaganda war escalates. Most people in the United States have the confused sense that they both know and do not know about U.S. military involvement abroad. By now everyone here knows something about Central America and Lebanon. But they find it hard to act on that knowledge and hard to wade through the constant flood of government and media lies. Those who travel to Nicaragua on work brigades, especially those who know Spanish, learn about that country through contact with ordinary people, sharing in their daily lives. This knowledge has all the immediacy of lived experience. It cuts through conflicting media reports, and it offers a direct experience of that reality

which has become such disputed turf in the propaganda war.

The official U.S. line about governmental involvement abroad is not coherent; contradictory governmental reports make the news day after day. Any small exercise in comparison and contrast reveals the Big Lie. For example, the Secretary of the Navy proclaimed on February 13 that U.S. ships were shelling Lebanon to support the Gemayel government. Since the President's line is that we are only protecting U.S. citizens' lives, the Secretary of the Navy had to back down.

With an historical memory we can make another comparison — the ships are shelling civilian targets in Lebanon with cluster bombs, an "antipersonnel" weapon used extensively in Vietnam. These bombs are full of plastic pellets, which embed themselves in people's bodies and remain there for the rest of their life, causing intense pain and requiring lifetime care for the adult or child. The plastic pellets cannot be detected by X-rays and therefore cannot be found and removed. Such a weapon signals that the major U.S. military goal is directly to attack civilians — especially families and women — the caretakers of the traumatized in any war.

Recently former ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, testified to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Latin America that Salvadoran rightwing leader Roberto D'Aubuisson presided over a meeting of twelve men, among whom he supervised the drawing of lots for the "honor" of murdering Archbishop Oscar Romero. Then d'Aubuisson ordered a death squad to murder the assassin.

What does receiving such information mean to us or to the U.S. Congress? Clearly, the former ambassador knows a lot about our government's support of the Salvadoran government and its death squads. Now, under oath, White tells his story, but probably not all of it. He does it for honor, for conscience, for realpolitik, who knows? We're glad for the testimony because his voice reaches more people than we can. But he tells only what many people already know; he adds only a new graphic detail about drawing lots.

His testimony falls into a major genre of news here: a high official reveals previously hidden information. Usually the hidden information has already lost its usefulness. Decisions based on its absence have been made. Interestingly, these revelations tend not to undermine the ruling class' credibility, but rather reinforce notions about the openness, honesty, or objectivity of the press, which is never faulted for not having published such information much earlier. Yet since Vietnam and Watergate, these delayed revelations seem to contribute to a credibility gap. A healthy doubt exists in the way the public receives their leaders' words, which the media so faithfully report. People are more skeptical now.

We must ask not only where the truth lies but also of what use it is. The oppressed need the truth that those in power have a reason to hide. Under the influence of an actor in the White House, our government manipulates the media constantly. It labels its adversaries with pejoratives, and it lies. The media rarely challenges these tactics openly.

The labels we hear present every social and world conflict in stark terms of good and evil. Since the government has to be good, all opposition has to be bad. Often these labels blame the victim. By projection, our government and the media attribute to the oppressed the traits of the oppressor. Thus, "terrorists" attacked the Marine Headquarters in Beirut with a truck bomb, not indigenous citizens who wished to drive out the invaders. Although the Marines are there to prop up a minority rightwing government, yet are called Peacekeepers.

In a similar abuse of language, "routine exercises" covers massive deployments of troops and equipment in Honduras near its borders. Now we learn that permanent military bases are being established there. Sometimes events render lies useless. The administration no longer refers to the land reform or human rights certifications in justifying aid to El Salvador. The lie wasn't big enough to cover up the reality.

Other times, apparent cases of Soviet or Chinese "abuses" get excessive press. Remember the defecting Chinese tennis player? The amount of news space here is all out of proportion to the event's social importance. Isolated human or natural catastrophes in the Third World are also reported regularly in the news, but not the on-going catastrophes caused by imperialism. An overloaded bus careening off a mountain road or a monsoon make the news, but not the widespread malnutrition and illiteracy. Certainly not reported were the 360 Nicaraguan civilians killed in 1983 (often beheaded or dismembered and the body parts scattered to make burial impossible) by U.S.-sponsored invaders. In terms of pacing and "chunking" information, the isolated incident gets reported, but its connection to other areas that impinge upon it does not get analyzed at all.

Most important, the media rarely calls U.S. government lies, lies. These include germ warfare in Afghanistan, Bulgarians trying to kill the Pope, the Vietnamese sending all their captured helicopters to Nicaragua, or Soviet influence in (even direction of!) the U.S. anti-nuclear movement. Similarly, during the Vietnam War, we heard the Pentagon death count of the enemy outstrip Vietnam's population figures. In the news, such lies are often preceded by, "Informed Pentagon sources say..." or "Experts report that..." In fact, everyone who has been involved in a protest movement, from a strike to a sit-in, is skeptical of the news. Protestors easily see how the press distorts their activity and their motives. Such experiences make us rely on and build alternative sources of information that belie the government's version of social reality. For

those working in the ecology and anti-nuclear movements, in anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggles, it becomes clear how the government's horrifyingly anti-life worldview disguises itself as a humanitarian one.

Those involved in resistance struggles need to find out and propagate the truth. Beyond relating isolated facts, they must develop and communicate to others an analysis of the social and political oppression that they and others experience. Here is where the resistance movement's credibility lies. For example, the Nicaraguan government, weak in resources, cannot manipulate the worldwide capitalist-controlled information network like the U.S. government can.

The Sandinistas gain popular support by telling the truth, and the truth is impressive, considering their social gains. Furthermore, the very events of the revolution taught a lot of previously veiled truths. When the barricades are up and the ruling class murders those it had exploited, events speak class relations. Today the Nicaraguan people, many of whom recently learned to read, are hungry for news, not just for information but analysis. Providing information and analysis strengthens the Sandinistas' political position and builds ongoing support for the revolution.

In contrast, because truth serves the revolution in El Salvador more than it does either the U.S. or Salvadoran governments, military and government officials in El Salvador, as well as much of the population have to listen to the FMLN-FDR's Radio Venceremos just to keep informed of current events. The U.S. government clearly wishes to close down alternate sources of information. Thus U.S. Navy ships off the Salvadoran coast have powerful jammers which interfere with Radio Venceremos. Our government restricts travel to Cuba, closes Nicaraguan consulates, and denies a visa to Nicaraguan leader Tomas Borge. And when some revolutionary Central American leaders do come to this country to describe their people's situation, as with Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal's or three Central American trade unionists' visits to the San Francisco area, the local press usually does not report it. Furthermore, although solidarity groups, such as Casa El Salvador and CISPES translate and distribute detailed press releases from the FMLN-FDR and other information about the situation there, the commercial press disdains such sources of information which contradict U.S. Government reports.

Within the Marxist theory of dialectics, it is assumed that people's social position shapes any investigation they undertake. It also shapes the variety of and the importance assigned to the factors considered and the relevance attached to the various ties between factors. Beyond that, people master and use only those concepts which have some vitality for them because of their own lives.

For example, teachers who choose to teach an anti-imperialist film, such as *EL SALVADOR: ANOTHER VIETNAM*, take a first step toward combating disinformation. Beyond that, by now having a pedagogic stake in the issue, they have a more personal reason to develop their own ongoing awareness and analysis of events in Central America. As a result, terms, such as U.S. "imperialism" and "intervention," have an explanatory force for these teachers and some of their students which such words do not convey to those not so involved. Clearly, our government and the news media do not use these terms at all when discussing such issues as the International Monetary Fund, the Big Pine Games in Honduras, or elections in El Salvador.

An analysis of imperialism restores the "facts" reported in the news to their historical context and interconnectedness. We need to reestablish both our personal and collective memory and not "forget" like CBS news does. An analysis of imperialism lets us do this. But such knowledge presupposes our involvement in the struggle to abolish imperialism. Otherwise the news may anesthetize us, keeping us statically up-to-date with a daily dose of awful events. In such a case, watching the news every night on television merely reaffirms for us that we have gotten our socially necessary fix of the real world.

For people who have a personal commitment to end U.S. military involvement abroad and now want more information, a good source for such information comes from radical newspapers and magazines, which provide accurate and dependable reportage from the Third World. Best is the weekly *Guardian* (33 W 17th St., NYC 10011: 6 mo. sub, \$14.50). For those unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with the paper's left jargon, this will be a problem; but the coverage of events in the Third World is excellent and detailed.

The social democratic weekly, *In These Times* (1300 W. Belmont Ave., Chicago, IL, 60657: 1 year sub, \$29.50) is less consistent, but has published several good articles on Central America. More from a liberal point of view is *The Nation* (P.O. Box 1953, Marion, OH, 43305: 1 year sub, \$40) which has published several special issues on Central America. The best source of detailed, Marxist analyses of key issues and areas in Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean is *NACLA's Report on the Americas* (151 W. 19th St., NY, NY, 10011: 1 year sub — 6 issues — \$15). And from a militantly Christian point of view comes the monthly *Sojourners* (PO Box 29272, Washington, D.C., 20017: 1 year sub, \$15) which has written extensively about Central America and whose editors have participated in the Witness for Peace program in Nicaragua.

All these magazines and papers are available on many newsstands and bookstore racks; most would be in public and university libraries. Also many daily newspapers from Europe and Canada are available in many

such libraries. This press often provides more detailed coverage of international news than does the press here. Furthermore, the major Mexican periodicals report extensively on events in Latin and Central America. In these bourgeois journalistic traditions, the concept of U.S. imperialism has a broad social acceptance and analytic force which it does not have here. Radical bookstores carry a large selection of publications that have in-depth analyses and often detailed histories of countries in the Third World. For those of our readers who do not have access to such stores, we recommend the Modern Times Bookstore catalogue and bi-monthly booklists (968 Valencia, San Francisco, CA, 94110; \$3).

Gathering and providing radical information can transform established cultural institutions. Recently, we have seen a nation-wide response to the Artists Call in solidarity with Central American revolutions. In each city, galleries and museums have organized programs about El Salvador and Nicaragua. A wide range of people participated in these shows, from established figures in the art world to solidarity workers providing resources, slide shows, and eyewitness reports. Artists Call has been a grassroots movement, with pluralistic views about how art and politics might mix. "Fame" and hierarchies in the art world were both used and broken down, since programs often consisted of "famous" crowd-drawing artists and people working in the local community. Everyone who had something to contribute could do so. In terms of a more long-range effect, the Artists Call events established new politicized networks among artists and solidarity workers here.

Learning about imperialism must relate to our deeper social needs. As we demand more from public institutions, we learn to gain effective social information for ourselves in an expanded and integrated way. Once we step out of paralysis, which is not so inevitable, and act collectively with others to change the conditions under which we live, our capacity for analysis surpasses merely receiving the "news." We then participate in a communications network which empowers us as it helps us shape our world.